8 August 2000
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Committee on Conferences
Substantive session of 2000

Draft report

Addendum

Rapporteur: Mr. Peter **Van De Velde** (Belgium)

III. Translation- and interpretation-related matters

A. Use of remote interpretation

Introduction and overview

1. At its substantive session of 1999, the Committee on Conferences commended the efforts of the Secretariat to develop a system of remote interpretation and looked forward to additional experiments in the future. The Committee also requested the Secretariat to further refine the cost considerations of remote interpretation, taking into account not only technological possibilities but also the cost benefits of remote interpretation, including the relative cost advantages of the different conference centres that were likely providers of remote interpretation services, and to report thereon.

2. In its resolution 54/248, the General Assembly decided that, in the absence of an Assembly decision to the contrary, the use of remote interpretation would not constitute an alternative to the current institutionalized system of interpretation and that the use of remote interpretation should not affect the quality of interpretation or in itself lead to any further reduction in language posts, nor would it affect the equal treatment of the six official languages. The Assembly requested the Secretary-General to keep under review the introduction and use of any new technology, in particular remote interpretation, and to report thereon to the Assembly on a regular basis.

3. In his 1999 report on developments in the field of remote interpretation (A/54/176), the Secretary-General announced that an experiment involving the servicing from Geneva of a full-scale intergovernmental meeting, with six languages, to be held at Nairobi, would take place as early as possible in 2000.

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4. At its 429th meeting, on 7 August 2000, the Committee on Conferences considered the report of the Secretary-General on remote interpretation (A/55/134), which concerned the organization of the Geneva-Nairobi experiment.

5. The selection of the duty stations involved in the experiment was based on the availability of interpretation staff and vacant conference rooms equipped with interpretation booths at Geneva, as well as the possibility of enhancing the use of existing meeting facilities at Nairobi, where permanent interpreters were not yet posted.

6. Preparations for the experiment, involving extensive arrangements, started in early January 2000. By 14 March 2000, however, it had been concluded that it was not prudent to make substantial financial commitments or to undertake further technical and staffing preparations. A slippage of just a few days in any activity would mean that considerable resources would have been spent and the technical set-up would not have been in place for the experiment to take place between 8 and 12 May. In the absence of another scheduled meeting at Nairobi suitable for the experiment, preparations had been suspended.

Discussion

7. Understanding was expressed for the reasons that had forced the Secretariat to discontinue the experiment of servicing from Geneva a meeting held at Nairobi, and members expressed the hope that the Secretariat would not be discouraged from further efforts in that field.

8. Attention was drawn to the potential benefits to be derived from the introduction of remote interpretation at all duty stations, including the smaller centres, which could become both providers and recipients of the service.

9. It was suggested that consideration be given to the use of remote interpretation to alleviate the scarcity of interpretation resources at Headquarters, by resorting to evening teams working from European duty stations and to the use of remote interpretation for meetings of substantive bodies as well as regional groups.

10. The need to consider the possible hidden costs of remote interpretation was underlined and attention was drawn to the need to look at all aspects of the proposal, including the reality of the existing deficiencies in the technical capacities at some duty stations.

11. Additional information was sought with regard to the connectivity test that had been conducted in the last week in January 2000. The representative of the Secretariat explained that it had been a test of equipment and not of remote interpretation. The test had been designed to verify the compatibility of the sound transmitted via satellite with the sound installations in the conference rooms at the United Nations Office at Nairobi.

Conclusions and recommendations

12. The Committee on Conferences took note of the report of the Secretary-General on remote interpretation (A/55/134) and requested the Secretariat to keep it informed of future activities in the field of remote interpretation.

13. The Committee reiterated its understanding that the introduction of remote interpretation was not intended to replace traditional interpretation systems without the explicit approval of the General Assembly.

14. The Committee requested that future reports on the matter include an analysis of the cost of any proposed system and of its impact on the working conditions of interpreters.

15. The Committee recommended that remote interpretation should not be confined to specific duty stations, that each duty station should be considered both as recipient and provider and that the Secretariat should explore every opportunity for its introduction.

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B. Utilization of new technologies

Introduction and overview

1. In section D, paragraph 1, of its resolution 54/248 of 23 December 1999, the General Assembly requested the Secretary-General to continue the efforts to utilize new technologies, such as computer-assisted translation, remote translation, terminology databases and speech recognition, in the six official languages so as to enhance further the productivity of conferences, and to keep the General Assembly informed of the introduction and use of any other new technology.

2. At its 430th meeting, on 7 August 2000, the Committee considered the report of the Secretary-General on the utilization of new technologies (A/AC.172/2000/5).

Discussion

3. Attention was drawn to the ongoing technology projects in computer-assisted translation, remote translation, speech recognition, terminology databases, electronic referencing and use of digital audio recording technology, and to the fact that, although investment and maintenance costs (procurement and maintenance of software licences, contracting of training and technical support services) were modest, technology projects entailed hidden costs to the Organization in terms of staff time spent on training, software customization and file processing or conversion.

4. The hope was expressed that future reports of the Secretary-General on this subject would contain more reporting on coordination in the area of technological innovation. Clarification was sought regarding the suggestion in paragraph 18 of the

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report of the Secretary-General that proximity might be one of the criteria for the allocation of remote translation responsibilities. Information was also sought about the feasibility of using File Transfer Protocol (FTP) sites at duty stations other than Headquarters and the United Nations Office at Geneva.

5. Some members were impressed by the level of in-house expertise and wondered whether any tangible recognition was given to these skills. Additional information was sought with regard to the possible hidden costs of remote translation.

6. In response to the questions posed, the representative of the Secretariat said that the references to coordination in the report had deliberately been kept vague so that the various duty stations could themselves report on their experiences and initiatives. The Organization had no formal system in place to reward linguists who developed expertise in particular areas of technology. The hidden costs of remote translation consisted mainly of the cost of transmittal of the documents and was therefore very modest. FTP technology could be implemented at minimal cost at other conference-servicing centres involved in remote translation.

Conclusions and recommendations

7. The Committee on Conferences welcomed the information contained in the report of the Secretary-General and the efforts that were being made to introduce new technologies in the area of conference services.

8. The Committee encouraged the Secretary-General to continue those efforts and requested that the Committee be kept informed of the progress made.

9. The Committee welcomed the proposal to extend the service of dedicated FTP sites to other conference centres, in view of the greater speed and reliability which they offered and their low cost.

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IV. Information technology

Introduction and overview

1. In its resolution 54/82 B of 6 December 1999, the General Assembly took note with appreciation of the efforts of the Secretary-General to develop and enhance the United Nations web sites in all official languages of the Organization and requested him to pursue those efforts and to develop proposals for achieving modular parity among the official languages of the Organization in a cost-effective manner and with a focus on textual content.

2. Recognizing the importance of parity among all the United Nations official languages, the General Assembly, in its resolution 54/249 of 23 December 1999 on the proposed programme budget for the biennium 2000-2001, decided to convert three positions relating to web sites in Arabic, Chinese and Russian into established posts.

3. At its 432nd meeting, on 8 August 2000, the Committee considered the report of the Secretary-General on multilingual development, maintenance and enrichment of United Nations web sites (A/AC.198/2000/7-A/AC.172/2000/4).

4. In introducing the report, the representative of the Department of Public Information said that the Committee on Information had asked the Department to elaborate on the further steps required and resources needed for an incremental, or modular, approach to achieving fully linguistic parity. In order to provide the secure base required for the effective maintenance of the web sites, the Department had proposed an additional eight Professional and five General Service posts, at a biennial cost of some $2.5 million. That amount did not include the infrastructure and technical support requirements of the Information Technology Services Division of the Department of Management, nor did it include the costs to the substantive departments of developing content.

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5. Much had already been done to enhance multilingualism in the web sites within existing resources, including the posting of General Assembly resolutions, major Security Council documents and major reports of the Secretary-General, and the creation of new sites, such as that for the Millennium Assembly, in all the official languages. The Department was also redesigning the top layers of the United Nations home page to enhance navigability and accessibility in all languages.

Discussion

6. The view was expressed that the tremendous growth in the use of the United Nations web sites — which had over 20 million hits in January 2000 — was evidence of the great success of the initiative. The fact that the original graphic design had withstood the test of time was proof of its high quality. Although so much had been done through temporary and ad hoc arrangements, the time had now come for a more coordinated approach.

Conclusions and recommendations

7. The Committee commended the efforts of the Department of Public Information in developing the United Nations web sites.

8. The Committee noted that it had now become necessary to consider Internet activity as an integral part of the work programme of the Organization. It was essential for the full multilingual development, maintenance and enrichment of the web sites that each content-providing office include web-specific content to be made available on the web sites, as part of its regular programme activity, and make budgetary provisions accordingly.

9. The Committee also noted that, since Member States had indicated that web site activities should not be seen as replacing traditional means of communication, a realistic and cost-effective plan of action would need to be developed to meet the requirement of linguistic parity. In the event that Member States wished to approve of any new web site initiative involving expenditure, it would be necessary for a written statement of programme budget implications to be presented to the Committee on Information before it reached any decision on the substance.

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V. Review of the procedure on the participation of observers

Introduction and overview

1. The General Assembly, in paragraph 2 of its resolution 53/208 A of 18 December 1998, invited the Committee on Conferences to consider the question of the participation of observers in the work of the Committee in accordance with the relevant rules of procedure of the Assembly.

2. At its 423rd meeting, on 1 September 1999, the Committee agreed on the following procedure regarding the participation of observers in the work of the Committee:

(a) An announcement would be made in the *Journal*, sufficiently in advance of a meeting of the Committee, to the effect that non-members were invited to participate as observers by sending a request in writing to the secretariat of the Committee on Conferences;

(b) On the basis of the written request, the secretariat would reserve a seat with the nameplate of each observer;

(c) Observers would be allowed to make one statement on each item on the agenda of the Committee. The length of the statement by each observer would be limited in accordance with the practices normally followed for the organization of special sessions of the General Assembly;

(d) The above-mentioned procedure would be indicated to the observers at the time that the secretariat responded to the written request for participation. In this context, the composition of the Committee on Conferences, as set out in section B, paragraph 2, of General Assembly resolution 43/222 of 21 December 1988, would be reiterated.

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3. At its organizational session, on 27 April 2000 (427th meeting), the Committee reviewed the current procedure and decided to do so again at its substantive session.

4. At its 432nd meeting, on 8 August 2000, the Committee reviewed the procedure. It was informed that announcements had been placed in the *Journal* sufficiently in advance of meetings of the Committee inviting non-members to participate as observers, and that the secretariat had received three written requests from Member States to participate as observers at its meetings since 1 September 1999. No observers had participated in the work of the Committee during its 2000 substantive session. The Committee decided that the procedure should remain in place and that it need not be reviewed further.